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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 007525

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KISL FR

SUBJECT: PARIS RIOTS CONTINUE FOR 7TH NIGHT

REF: PARIS POINTS 10/31 11/2 AND 11/3 (EMBASSY PARIS
SIPRNET SITE)

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: The rioting that began October 27 in Paris' "inner city" suburbs has persisted, every night, for a week so far. Running battles between riot police and rampaging youth have pitted tear gas and rubber bullets against taunts, stones, trash fires and car burnings. The accidental electrocution of two youths, as they hid from police in a power transformer installation, sparked the unrest, which has now spread to nine neighborhoods in the belt of lower-income suburbs to the North and East of Paris. These neighborhoods are home to racially distinct -- North and Sub-Saharan African -- immigrant communities that suffer from chronic unemployment and rampant discrimination. Government officials -- foremost among them Prime Minister de Villepin and Interior Minister Sarkozy -- have depicted the riots primarily as an issue of law and order and protection of property. Their critics, including in the opposition Socialist Party also for partisan purposes, see the problem more in terms of the unrelenting discrimination suffered by France's underclass minorities (doubly so when young and male) and have sharply criticized the government for an "overly forceful" response that may only exacerbate the situation. While we believe the government will succeed eventually in calming the situation, the riots are a clear reminder of France's growing minority problem. End Summary.

The Accident that Set Off the Violence

2. (SBU) On the evening of October 27 -- apparently while returning from a pick-up soccer game, and, possibly, in a hurry to get home to break the Ramadan fast -- three teenagers, taking flight to avoid a likely police identity check (one may not have had his papers on him), scaled the wall of a power transmission substation in order to hide from police there. Two were electrocuted, while a third was severely burned but survived. Family members of the victims have said that the youths were being chased by police. Government officials have insisted that police were not pursuing the victims, suggesting instead that the boys only believed they were being chased. (Note: Government spokespersons have provided -- and retracted -- differing versions of this event and other sub-plots in the burning suburbs story. End note.) The rumor quickly spread that police had killed the youths, sparking an initial round of car burning and destruction in the suburb of Clichy-sur-Bois during the evening of October 27.

Unrest Spreads

3. (SBU) Since then, sporadic, night-time clashes have spread to nine similar neighborhoods, with police resorting to the use of rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse rampaging groups of youths. On October 30, a tear gas canister landed inside a mosque in Clichy-sur-Bois, sending an estimated 700 worshippers fleeing. Government officials have announced that it is so far unclear who threw the canister, and that they were investigating the incident. Whether a rogue provocation by an individual police officer or simply an accident, the mosque incident has highlighted the religious difference that also sets these suburbs apart from the rest of French society. In all, at least 315 vehicles have been set ablaze, numerous buildings damaged, and more than 100 rioters arrested. There are press reports of minor injuries among both rioters and security forces, but no exact numbers have been released.

Government Response

4. (SBU) Since the riots began, the government has deployed some 2,000 additional security forces to the affected neighborhoods. On November 1, both PM de Villepin and Interior Minister Sarkozy met with the parents of the two victims. Villepin promised the bereaved parents a full investigation into the deaths of their children. Villepin also underlined "the need to restore calm." Sarkozy also met that evening with other relatives of the victims. Both Sarkozy and Villepin canceled or postponed travel plans abroad in order to focus on the government reaction to the riots. Villepin called a meeting of concerned cabinet ministers (Interior, Defense, Education, Social Cohesion, Justice, Overseas Territories, and Equal Opportunity) on

November 2 to address the situation. The same day, President Chirac, addressing the weekly Council of Ministers, called for calm and for an end to a "dangerous situation." Before the National Assembly on November 2, Villepin declared that the government was "fully mobilized" adding that, "our immediate priority is to restore public order, and restore it without delay."

15. (SBU) The Government's reaction to the events is consistent with the increasingly hard line it has begun to take in recent months. Since first becoming Interior Minister in 2002, Sarkozy has built a formidable reputation as a "man of action" committed to cracking down on crime. By coincidence, speaking in a difficult neighborhood on October 25, two days before the riots began, Sarkozy announced a new policy to combat violence in the suburbs, proclaiming that he would "clear away" the "scum." In all fairness to Sarkozy, however, it is also worth point out that, while tough on crime, he has also advocated a form of affirmative action ("positive discrimination") to promote the integration of disadvantaged minorities, state funding for Islam in France, and an extension of limited voting rights to legal immigrants who lack French nationality.

Government Under Fire

16. (C) Since the riots began, Sarkozy's critics and political opponents have criticized his tactics and words, arguing they have only helped fuel the violence. But there has also been a good deal of political posturing, aimed at weakening the center-right's leading candidate in advance of the 2007 presidential elections. Socialist former Prime Minister (and 2007 presidential hopeful) Laurent Fabius claimed that Sarkozy has "created a terrible environment" for fighting crime in the Paris suburbs, and that Sarkozy needs to focus more on crime prevention and less on crime fighting. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, another center-left presidential hopeful, echoed Fabius' sentiments and added, "Sarkozysm is not working."

In-fighting Within the Governing Party

17. (C) Sniping has also occurred within the government as part of the Sarkozy-Villepin duel over control of the center-right. Minister of Equal Opportunity (and Villepin ally) Azouz Begag sharply criticized Sarkozy's "warlike semantics." Chirac's statement to the cabinet that "the law must be applied firmly and in a spirit of dialogue and respect," was widely seen as a swipe at Sarkozy. For his part, Villepin has been heavily criticized for his "deafening silence" during the first five days of rioting. Criticism has also been leveled at both Sarkozy and Villepin for "empty" posturing -- presenting themselves and their actions as on-top-of-the-problem and effective -- in order to burnish their image as presidential candidates.

While Others Seek Underlying Causes

18. (SBU) Beyond partisan politics, however, others are beginning to look past the nightly violence to identify the serious social problem underpinning the rioting: the failure of France to integrate adequately its immigrant population, which faces unemployment well above France's 10 percent average. Since the late 1950s, immigrant workers arriving from North and Sub-Saharan Africa have been pushed into the bleak, densely packed suburbs that ring France's major cities, where they are subjected to job and housing discrimination as well as racial profiling by authorities. French ideals dictate that immigrants leave their cultural and ethnic identities at the border in order to assimilate; yet despite the pledge of "equality," the arrivals and their French-born children are regarded and treated as less than French by their compatriots. A common refrain, born out by independent research, is that a non-French sounding name on a job or housing application is enough to doom the applicant's prospects regardless of qualifications. As subsequent generations have determined that the promise of a better future for which their parents came to France is increasingly unattainable, they have become increasingly less willing to integrate. It is a vicious cycle. According to French sociologist Manuel Boucher, "French society is in a bad state... increasingly unequal, increasingly segregated, and increasingly divided along ethnic and racial lines." Describing the situation, one leader of a local Muslim Cultural Association said, "It's unemployment, it's pressure) it just exploded."

Comment

19. (C) The rioting is both a clear and present law and order problem and a symptom of deeper societal divisions. Currently, the riots are confined to small, prowling packs of young men in certain neighborhoods under cover of night. They do not appear likely to continue to grow significantly, and the government -- if it avoids exacerbating the situation -- should be successful in restoring order. It is important

to note that up until now, the riots have been driven by socio-economic frustration, and the religious link has been very minimal. However, November 3 marks start of Eid al Fitr, and it is unclear if this might have an impact on the rioting. Additional incidents could also aggravate the situation, and the chance exists, however slight, that the frustration and disenchantment of a broader spectrum of suburban residents could find some political manifestation -- such as a "general strike" in suburban neighborhoods.

10. (C) At this point, it is not clear what lessons the government will draw from the events. As noted above, Sarkozy has made some limited attempts to deal with the situation by mixing his law-and-order message with a call for affirmative action, proposals to provide funding for Islam in France, and voting rights for non-citizens. Given the polemics from the opposition Socialist Party and within his own party in the run-up to the 2007 Presidential elections, however, it seems more likely that the GOF will continue to try merely to manage the problem for the time being rather than come up with any long-term solutions. Please visit Paris' Classified Website at: <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm> Stapleton